

The Easy Yoke

Isaiah 50:4-9a | Psalm 31:9-16 | Philippians 2:5-11 | Matthew 26:14-27:66

ISAIAH 50:4-9A

⁴ *The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.* ⁵ *The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards.* ⁶ *I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.* ⁷ *The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;* ⁸ *he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.* ⁹ *It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.*

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of book VI of *The Republic*, Plato begins to describe his ideal state using the analogy of a ship. After explaining how sailors typically approach the task of captaining or ruling a ship, he notes, in the voice of Socrates, something important:

They don't know that for the true pilot, it is necessary to pay careful attention to year, seasons, heaven, stars, winds, and everything that's proper to the art, if he is really going to be skilled at ruling a ship.¹

Plato's point is that the best captain of a ship knows far more than just how to gain control or how a boat works. This section of *The Republic* describes what Plato calls the *philosopher-king*, the ruler who is not only informed and knowledgeable, but who is pursuing philosophical wisdom. His ideal world is one in which nations are governed by thoughtful, intelligent, sagacious *philosopher-kings*—pursuing rational solutions to serve an informed public.

Our reading from Isaiah 50 this morning envisions a similar world—a world in which the messianic king is a learned man, an ardent student of Yahweh's holy teaching. *And it is his dedication to this teaching that enables him to withstand the onslaught of an antagonistic world.* To see this and find appropriate value in it, however, we must consider the historical context of the exile, the fulfilment of this passage in Christ Jesus, and then its implications for us.

1. THE EXILIC SERVANT

From Isaiah 50:4-11, we have the third of four *servant songs*.² These songs relay the coming ministry of the *servant of the Lord* to a people who are in the midst of a terrible moment. Much like ours for us, their world was coming apart. They were on the cusp of being carried off into exile in Babylon, enslaved by King Nebuchadnezzar after watching their country destroyed

¹ Plato, *The Republic* (Second Edition; trans. A. Bloom; New York: Basic Books, 1968), 168. The metaphor is described, in particular, in 488a–489d.

² There are four servant Songs found in Isa 42:1–9, 49:1–13, 50:4–11, and 52:13–53:12. These songs describe the *servant of the Lord*, the Messiah, in his service, suffering, and eventual triumph. Themes in the songs include his meek and gentle character, his royal status, and his priesthood and atoning activities.

and their holiest site—the Temple—looted and burned. It was easily the darkest moment in their history since their enslavement in Egypt, a kind of reversal of the Exodus. And yet, as grave as things looked in those dark days, the prophet saw hope. He saw a Messiah, a *servant of the Lord*, who would establish justice (in contrast to the people who had perverted justice).³ This is the point of the first *servant song*. This Messiah would oversee the restoration of the land and return of God’s people to establish a peaceful kingdom. This is the point of the second *servant song*. And he would suffer and die like a slaughtered sheep, making atonement for the sins of the people. This is the point of the fourth *servant song*. But here in ours, the servant demonstrates his obedience—his listening to God’s Word and so vindication (in contrast to the disobedience of the people).

Notice in verse 4, the servant’s ear is awakened by God as those who are taught. In verse 5, God opened his ear and he heeded the word, not turning backwards. The imagery then turns to an important contrast—those who oppose the Messiah by pulling his beard, but he didn’t hide his face (verse 6). Instead, he set his face like stone (verse 7). What he’s been told by God, this Word of Yahweh that he’s learned, gives him resolve. He is confident that though he is opposed, though he is insulted and confronted, he will not be shamed. Triumph will be his.

2. THE EVENTUAL SERVANT

While the people of God on the verge of exile waited, hoping for such a triumphant servant—a Messiah—to come, the world around them crumbled. Some came back after Babylonian exile gave way to Persian enslavement. But many remained dispersed. Even in the Promised Land, the people remained in exile from God. The problem that these *servant songs* identify was not foreign armies or the devastated homeland. There was, and is, a bigger problem. It is the problem we saw just a few weeks ago when we looked at Genesis 3:1-7.⁴ Sin. Sin was the much bigger problem that plagued them. Their disobedience, their turning away from God’s Word, their rejection of his ways—this was the problem that remained. And this is the problem that the Messiah, the *servant of God* who came hundreds of years later, addressed.

We heard this in the Gospel reading from Matthew. The Messiah came in the person of Jesus Christ. And they spit in his face and struck him. They slapped him and tortured him.⁵ And eventually, they killed him—just as Isaiah envisioned. Why? To make an offering for the guilt of mankind (as Isaiah 53:10 puts it), to give his life as a ransom for many (as Mark 10:45 puts it).⁶ He did not back down and he did not fail. He set his face like flint. He overcame sin and death, providing to his people the way of salvation from sin. And even though it was ironic—even though those people who celebrated triumph on that first Palm Sunday celebrated better than they knew—Jesus Christ, the Messiah, was vindicated.

3. THE EXAMPLE SERVANT

Now, as we turn to the question of what this means for us, I want to confess my temptation here. I want to tell you that, in light of this COVID-19 pandemic, that we are like Christ Jesus.

³ It is often argued that the first and most proximate fulfillment of this prophecy is in the person of Jeremiah.

⁴ See my sermon at Christ Church from March 1, 2020, on Gen 2:15-17 and 3:1-7 titled “O Necessary Sin of Adam.”

⁵ See Matt 26:67-68, 27:26.

⁶ See Isa 53:10: “Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.” See also John 10:15, Rom 4:25, Gal 1:4 and 2:20, 1 Tim 2:6, Titus 2:14, and 1 Pet 1:18-19.

As he withstood those who set out to destroy him, as he found triumph and vindication before his enemies—so, too, we will overcome this pandemic and find vindication. And in the broadest theological sense, that is true. But it is not the point of this passage. And it overlooks something quite important.

This passage does not promise vindication to anyone but the Messiah. He alone was sinless and so deserved to be vindicated. And even if it did promise vindication to all of us, it does not mean we are spared. God's people were not spared exile. And God's Messiah was not spared a gruesome death for the sins of all.

Now to be clear—despite the fact that I'm being broadcast onto a screen in your home—I'm not a televangelist who is suggesting to you that this pandemic is a punishment for some particular sin. It's hard to legitimately correlate particular sins to particular punishments. But neither am I denying the correlation between the fall, our sinfulness, and the destruction of our world through things like environmental damage, moral decay, pestilence, and yes, even a viral pandemic. But the word here is not one of victory any more than the *triumphal entry* signified success without suffering and death.

The word is one of comfort through hearing. Verse 4 of our passage makes it clear. The tongue of the *servant* is that of a teacher, so that he may sustain the weary with a word. The next verse after our passage picks up on this: "*Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the LORD and relies upon his God?*"⁷ Comfort comes to those who hear and obey the voice of the servant, the one who walked through darkness and yet relied on God. Our hope is not in hot weather, proper hygiene, government guidelines, or even the triumph of medicine—though these are all important things. Our hope is in the word learned by our Messiah and taught to us, that we may be the weary who are sustained. Our Savior, Christ Jesus, is the true *philosopher-king*, a man wise with experience, knowledgeable of the Word of God, and fit to lead us through because he has triumphed over sin and death already. Listen to the news, gather information, and be wise about your life right now. But do not neglect the wisdom of the One who has overcome a pandemic far worse than COVID-19, the pandemic of sin—with 100 percent infection and 100 percent mortality. Listen to the word of the only one who has triumphed.

CONCLUSION

In short, let his word comfort you, you who are weary.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.⁸

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, as we travel along in this extended Lent, may we find comfort in the wise word of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, until that day we are able celebrate with him face-to-face. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁷ Isa 50:10.

⁸ Matt 11:28-30.